

Remarks to the UC Board of Regents

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It has certainly been an interesting experience to serve as chair of the University of California Academic Senate and to have a vantage point in what have proven to be tumultuous times for UC and for higher education generally. Of course, the tumult extends to years prior as well. When I was chair of the Irvine division of the Senate in 2019-20, I recall the efforts expended on how to keep the wildcat strike of graduate students at UC Santa Cruz from spreading and disrupting instruction at our campus. At the same time, it was becoming clearer by the day that something else was spreading—a little virus—that would disrupt instruction in ways that would be deemed, ad nauseum, *unprecedented*. I never did like that “unprecedented” characterization, for although true that previous eras did not have Zoom, certainly there had been plagues. We literary studies types indeed found some comfort in reconsidering past narratives of contagion and recovery: Giovanni Boccaccio’s *Decameron* (1353), a hundred tales traded by ten wealthy young women and men sheltering from the Black Death; Daniel Defoe’s *Journal of the Plague Year* (1722), a fictional journalistic account of the last visitation of the bubonic plague in London in 1665; or Albert Camus’s *The Plague* (1947), which flirts with the notion of pestilence as allegory for other human or human-made ills. In any case, my email correspondence from the beginning of our plague era suggests that most of us initially imagined a disruption in in-person instruction and campus life that would be brief—a few weeks—followed by the dawning realization that we were in this for a longer haul.

If I were to measure impacts on higher education in terms of disruption and duration, I would not rank the pandemic too highly. Nor would I rank too highly those other disruptive events that have marked my term as vice chair and chair of the Academic Senate: the demonstrations, counterdemonstrations, encampments, clashes, negotiations, and police actions in the wake of the Hamas attacks of October 7th and Israel’s response; or the rapid emergence and accessibility of generative AI. As to the protests, my sense is that universities, including our UC system, will ultimately find ways to strike the difficult balance of commitment to free expression and support for impassioned—and preferably informed—political engagement with principles of community. At the same time, there is plenty of post-event analysis to be done and accountability to be assessed concerning how different campus encampments were ended. As to AI, I imagine that large language models will be incorporated into our work and into our world in various ways, for good and ill, as has been the case with other media and technological revolutions. Here too, there is plenty of work to be done—and we have just started to figure out how best to bring AI into the classroom, how to manage its impact on admissions, how to think about its immense carbon footprint as we try to “decarbonize” our campuses, and much more. In both cases, the Academic Senate stands ready to engage constructively with our partners in university governance.

What, then, would I rank highest in terms of disruption and duration when it comes to the university? Going back to the UC Santa Cruz wildcat strike that I mentioned: highest, I believe, is the organization of labor at the university, including *how* instructional labor is carried out and *by whom*. Perhaps I think this because my time as Academic Senate vice chair and chair has been bookended by instructional and research workforce strikes, starting with the UAW strikes over contract terms in fall of 2022 and ending with the stand-up strikes that began in May 2024 and concluded—sort of—with a judge-imposed temporary restraining order last month. The academic labor landscape has been evolving for some time,

as my own graduate education took place when the unionization of graduate students was getting underway. Although Columbia University, where I earned my PhD, did not have a unionization movement at the time, I can well recall the heated conversations of friends at Yale over graduate student unionization in the mid-1990s. By the way, Yale graduate and professional students got their union in 2023, after three decades of organization. Columbia graduate students got theirs in 2016.

I don't intend to disparage or diminish the unionization movement by suggesting that unionization is also, at least in part, symptomatic of underlying changes in the organization of labor at the university broadly. Let me approach this topic through the lens of student-faculty ratios, which are often considered one of the best metrics of instructional—and therefore institutional—*quality*.

For this, I turn to UC's own institutional data dashboards. If we go back some two decades, the systemwide student-faculty ratio in 2005-06 was 25.3. By 2022-23, the ratio had increased to 29.6. This, if we limit faculty to ladder-rank and equivalent alone. Meanwhile, if we take non-ladder rank and equivalent faculty and exclude ladder-rank, the ratio is 100.4 in 2005-06; in 2022-23, the ratio had dropped to 97.4. Now, there is some interesting texture in this overall trend, if you go campus by campus. The numbers nonetheless confirm that a key metric of quality has been heading in the wrong direction and, further, that we rely heavily as an institution on non-ladder-rank or equivalent faculty. None of this should come as a surprise. It also maybe doesn't look that dire within the two-decade range.

Given my interest in the institutional long-term, I wanted to go further back in time. Unfortunately, the data dashboards cut off at 2003-04, so I dug into some historical and archival research that led to Regents meeting minutes prior to this cutoff. In addition to reporting numbers, these minutes are also rich in what we might call humanistic evidence—embedded in language and rhetoric—of a different Board and of a different world. Allow me to cherry-pick a few examples from the minutes of the Committee on Finance from May 18, 2000:

“The quality of the faculty, more than any other factor, determines the quality of the university. One of the biggest challenges facing the University as it grows over the next decade is the recruitment and retention of the best faculty.”

“Nothing is more certain to undermine quality than an inability to offer competitive salaries.”

And more to my previous points:

“A key measure of quality and competitiveness with other research institutions is the student-faculty ratio. Until 1990-91, the University's budgeted student-faculty ratio was 17.6:1. This ratio was already higher than two of its public salary comparison institutions and significantly higher than all of its private comparison institutions. With the budget cuts of the early 1990s, the student-faculty ratio deteriorated even further, rising to 18.7:1. As the State's fiscal situation began to improve, The Regents identified restorations of the student-faculty ratio to its traditional level as one of its highest priorities.”

There are various ways that we might unpack and address not only this trend of increasing student-faculty ratios but also attitudes about it. First, we might wonder at what point the ratio becomes actively damaging to instructional quality. We're not supposed to air this concern publicly, but I would suggest we have long-since passed the threshold. I would also add that if one of the hallmarks of instructional quality at a research university is that the same faculty who do the research do the

teaching—or the bulk of it—then shifting instructional load to less costly adjuncts and graduate students constitutes a significant part of that harm. Second, in allowing the ratio increase and the adjunctification of instruction, the University has at least in part contributed to the mismatch of PhD supply to ladder-rank faculty positions available. And should we be surprised if graduate students who provide instruction to our undergraduates en route to their doctoral degrees but don't see faculty jobs as likely future outcomes consider themselves in the present more as employees than students? That has long been the case in the humanities and parts of the social sciences. In STEM areas, it seems the PhD route being used as a step to a job outside of the academy leads to a similar attitude, albeit not as acutely felt.

All this to say that I hope that when the Board considers priorities such as increasing the number of undergraduates enrolled, you seriously attend to these fundamental structural issues. For what it's worth, I don't think online instruction or AI will provide solutions to these labor organization problems—although they may do the opposite.

The most concise definition of ideology I can think of is this: believing that historical contingencies are natural features of the world. The traditional antidote to ideology is critique, and critique clears the ground for constructive intervention. I would say that both the Board and the Senate have a shared responsibility to approach the University and its component parts—including the Board and the Senate themselves—critically. If that sounds uncomfortably Marxist to you, let me close my final set of remarks with a quotation from Confucius: “The Master said: ‘Reviewing the old as a means of realizing the new—such a person can be considered a teacher.’” Well, a boy can dream.